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The Pure Consciousness Event, Ineffability, and Christian Mysticism

Robert Forman, in his book *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, defends religious perennialism by arguing against the opposing constructivist claim that all human experiences (including mystical ones) are dependent on our ways of perceiving and thinking about the world, which are in turn dependent on our culture and language and other societal factors. He provides the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) as an example of an unconditioned and ultimately ineffable mystical experience that is the same whenever it is experienced by virtue of the fact that it is without content (and therefore lacks anything to be constructed). In his explanation of the PCE as the result of a successive forgetting of all content, Forman relies on several comparisons to the works of the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, including the mystical account in support of the PCE he calls “most extensive”: an interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology* by the anonymous author of *Deonise Hid Divinity*. “In this work,” Forman writes, “the presence of one form of cognitive content after another is ruled out from the contemplative experience he advocates: sensation, understanding, external and internal imagery, future and past imaginings, and so on” (32). Both Robert Forman and the author of this text interpret *The Mystical Theology* as a progressive forgetting, using its structure to give evidence for a contentless experience in the Dionysian corpus. Since the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius play such an important and foundational role in Christian mysticism and in Forman’s defense of the PCE as a mystical experience, the presence of a PCE in *The Mystical Theology*—

at the very least in the Dionysian corpus more widely—therefore seems crucial for the acceptance of Forman’s conclusion. Instances of logical ineffability may also alert us to possible instances of the Pure Consciousness Event, which being without concepts must also be without words. Finally, a comparison between the ineffable entity in Christian mysticism (as it is represented in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius) and the ineffable entity in Madhyamaka Buddhism (as it is represented in *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*) can allow for a more direct examination of the basic perennialist argument Forman intends to defend: that all major religions share a common ineffable ultimate.

The structure of *The Mystical Theology* is some of the most promising evidence for Forman’s conclusion, and it seems to be the reason for the interpretation given by the anonymous author of *Deonise Hid Divinity*. Dionysius explains this structure in the following passage from the third chapter:

When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought? (139-140)

The method of first denying those things that differ most from God and then proceeding to deny the qualities more true of it can seem at first to parallel Forman’s suggested process for arriving at pure consciousness, where he suggests one of the last things to be forgotten is the system of

forgetting that leads to the PCE. In both cases, those things that are easiest to leave behind are denied first, then those which are more difficult, and the end result is the sense that everything has been denied or forgotten. However, there is a notable difference: namely, that there is no assertion that the PCE in any way resembles the method that leads to it or any of the other things that are forgotten as it approaches. In fact, to be truly pure and perfectly ineffable, as Forman insists it is, it must be equally unlike all descriptions that might be pinned to it. If it was more a feeling of thought than of rage, then it would be more correct to ascribe terms of thought to it than terms of anger, and in this way, it would become at least partially describable, perceptible or conceptual, and therefore capable of being constructed. When Dionysius claims that the order of denials is significant in *The Mystical Theology*, that God is more like life or goodness than like air or stone, he leads us away from any extreme notion that the experience of God is absolutely ineffable or unable to be constructed in any aspect.

Furthermore, if the structure of *The Mystical Theology* is to function as a crucial part of Forman's thesis, then the structure of other sections of the Dionysian corpus should be accepted as evidence by him as well. While *The Mystical Theology*'s movement from assertion to denial, lightness to mystical darkness, does clearly advocate some experience of "unknowing" as both Dionysius and Forman refer to it, some of Dionysius's other texts demonstrate a completely opposite structure, including his explanation of the rite of the synaxis (or Eucharist, communion). Dionysius references his teacher when he calls the synaxis "the sacrament of sacraments," and it is arguably the most important religious experience for Christian mystics like him. Dionysius submits that it is the most central to perfection of the other symbols and sacraments, and that "it was this [sacrament] which first gave me the gift of sight. The light coming first from this led me

toward the vision of the other sacred things” (210). The synaxis, unlike *The Mystical Theology*, flows from unity and divine darkness to multiplicity and light:

Then he performs the most divine acts and lifts into view the things praised through the sacredly clothed symbols. The bread which had been covered is now uncovered and divided into many parts. Similarly, he shares the one cup with all, symbolically multiplying and redistributing the One in symbolic fashion. With these things he completes the most sacred act. For because of his goodness and his love for humanity the simple, hidden oneness of Jesus, the most divine Word, has taken the route of incarnation for us and, without undergoing any change, has become a reality that is composite and visible” (221-222).

The structure of the description of the synaxis makes it quite clear that this particular experience of God is a constructed one, of which constructivists can make coherent sense. The hierarchy presents the perceptible symbols of the bread and wine, and those in attendance understand those symbols conceptually, through their relation to Jesus. The repetition of the word symbol and the description of Jesus as “the most divine Word” both serve to indicate that there is no ineffability here. Dionysius’s resulting “vision of the other sacred things” and any union with God that is achieved in the ritual, sacramental sense, then, cannot be construed as an experience resembling a Pure Consciousness Event or even as an ineffable experience. They occur because Dionysius or those experiencing unity have experienced and thought about the perceptible symbols, and not because they deny them (in which case Dionysius would not attribute his insights to the sacrament). Instead of an ascent to a realm existent beyond the mind, the overall feeling represented here is that God descends to the realm of the perceptible and speakable, becoming “composite and visible” and understandable in some ways by humans.

The idea that God makes such a descent through perceptible or conceptual symbols is expressed in other parts of the Dionysian corpus as well. The ecclesiastical hierarchy, according to Dionysius, is intended to mirror its celestial counterpart in an earthly form. Both *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Celestial Hierarchy* therefore share a similar structure to the one that is expressed in the rite of the synaxis and an opposite structure from the one represented in *The Mystical Theology*. Knowledge of God flows downward through the hierarchy of angels before it reaches humans, and while angels come to know about God in ways that are of and beyond the mind, Dionysius designates to humans a reality more focused on the perceptible. It is this fundamental difference that separates the celestial hierarchy from the earthly, ecclesiastical one. The necessity of perceptible symbols to humans in gaining knowledge of God is expressed by Dionysius in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, when he states “for it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness... gifts which are granted to us in a symbolic mode” (146). In the final sentence of this passage, beauty as it appears to humans is a sign that leads us to make inferences about the source of that beauty, which by virtue of being invisible is unknown to us at least in some ways. The example of beauty is also significant because beauty is a divine name. The transmission of the divine names is also said to flow outward or downward from God, so the divine names, like hierarchical knowledge, are also somewhat removed from God when we experience them: we receive them indirectly and imperfectly.

The knowledge of God gained through perceptible symbols therefore seems to be the primary way humans come to know God, and in passages such as this one, Dionysius even goes

so far as to claim it is the only way. He speaks about the visions of saints in this way as well, asserting that “no one ever has seen or ever will see the being of God in all its hiddenness. Of course God has appeared to certain pious men in ways which were in keeping with his divinity. he has come in certain sacred visions fashioned to suit the beholders (...) where the formless God is represented in forms” (Pseudo-Dionysius 157). Clearly, these symbolic visions bear a close relationship to the material or perceptible signs by which Dionysius thinks we must come to know God. Because they have form, they bear no relationship to Pure Consciousness Events, and because they are conceptual in nature, the knowledge we gain from them is not ineffable. An inference from forms, symbols, or appearances of the divine names in the human realm to the nature of God is merely an extension of human concepts.

When Dionysius posits that God is ineffable to us, then, this does not appear to mean that he is absolutely ineffable—only relatively so. We can make inferences about what he is like based on the ways he is reflected in the tangible, visible world, but we do not obtain direct, immediate knowledge of him. There is a limit to what we can know that is suggested by Dionysius in many ways, one example being the often repeated phrase (even in *The Mystical Theology*) “strive upward as far as you can” (135). Reading the word ‘can’ in its literal sense, Dionysius is saying we can only experience God to the extent we are able. This might seem obvious and unremarkable, in a certain light, but the fact that he is careful not to insist that we ever come to know God in its entirety is important. It is in this context, recognizing God’s ultimate transcendence of all human symbols and signs, that Dionysius explains the reasons for negation. In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, he states:

Then there is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things

which show not what he is but what in fact he is not. This way of talking about him seems to me much more appropriate [than representing him symbolically through the divine names], for, as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility (...) Indeed the sheer crassness of the signs is a goad so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things (Pseudo-Dionysius 149-150).

Here, Dionysius explains his affinity for negation by the reasoning that, when it comes to knowing God completely (i.e., in his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility), the signs are not enough. Signs attempt to ascribe to God the terms of ‘the things that have being,’ and so any sign becomes inadequate to describing God in a complete or absolute sense. Signs and forms only help us to postulate things about God, to know him in a relative way suited to our nature, by the perceptible ways he appears in the world, which are diluted, weak, incomplete, and indirect in comparison with God himself.

Dionysius’s reasoning in favor of negative theology in this passage gives us some insights about how we perhaps ought to understand *The Mystical Theology*: as his own attempt to negate the divine names, being signs and forms in the realm of (human) beings that cannot ultimately capture the creator of all beings in his entirety. When Dionysius negates the divine names, we can therefore infer that he does not mean there is nothing in them that captures a likeness of some element or characteristic of God. Rather, we can interpret his negation of divine name X as implying something like “God is ultimately beyond the human conception of X” or “God transcends X, as it appears in the human realm.”

The experience in the Dionysian corpus most like a Pure Consciousness Event is likely that of Moses in *The Mystical Theology*, who “plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible (...) [he] knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing” (137). There are, perhaps, two different possibilities for what Moses’s experience might mean. If we view the “unknowing” by the interpretation of negative theology offered by Dionysius in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, we can say that Moses comes closest to knowing God in his absolute (intangible and invisible) form by realizing that this knowledge of God is beyond him and his mind. The darkness is ‘truly’ mysterious in the sense that truly implies ultimately, not in the sense that truly implies completely or absolutely: the things denied last are still those most applicable to God, things we are capable of saying about him in a relative manner. This way of making sense of Moses’s experience helps it to seem compatible with its place in *The Mystical Theology*, and with the flow from Moses into Dionysius’s lament, “if only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge” (138). Not even Moses actually obtains direct vision or knowledge of God by this view. The other possibility is that Moses obtains a ‘vision’ of God beyond concepts and perceptions, one that is beyond normal kinds of mental knowledge. However, to make this possibility coherent in the context of *The Mystical Theology* as a whole, we must assume that this experience is more closely described by those things denied last—that he does not have an experience of God wherein God is equally unified and equally multiplicitous or where God is equally the source of all and the source of nothing. In either case, Moses’s experience of God cannot be a PCE, nor is it absolutely ineffable.

Numerous features of God as it is represented by Dionysius bear some relationship to the

underlying reality for Mahayana Buddhists as it is described in the Vimalakirti sutra. There are two major significant (though related) differences, and the first of these is that God is only relatively ineffable in the Dionysian corpus, while the underlying nature of reality in the case of Madhyamaka Buddhism is absolutely ineffable because it is relegated to realm beyond the human by definition. The second major difference between the two has to do with the religions' different philosophies on origination; the fact that God in the context of Christian mysticism is a single, unchanging entity who causes all things but is affected by nothing is deeply problematic for all Buddhists, who value the doctrine of dependent origination. That all things arise and exist dependently with others, in a fluidly changing and never static way, is even more important in the case of Madhyamaka Buddhism than Theravada. This difference arises because, in a departure from original Theravada Buddhism, the Madhyamaka school views the five aggregates, as well as the perceptions and concepts that they generate as ultimately empty (dependent) themselves, finding them to be too much like an unchanging self to be compatible with the concept of dependent origination. We are left with an ultimate reality beyond the reality that we can perceive and conceptualize; the whole of our perceived reality itself (including the aggregates and all of our imaginable concepts) must too be conditioned—by some outside reality that we cannot conceptualize, sense, or perceive. This ultimate reality must be entirely outside of our own, since the whole of our perceived reality cannot contribute to its own origin without defying the doctrine of codependent arising. For obvious reasons, this ultimate, outside reality must be absolutely ineffable. It cannot be conceived of by any human-like entity by definition, so it cannot be put into words through any human-like thought process, which makes it different from God in the Dionysian corpus, of whom we can say many things, using perceptible symbols, revealed knowledge, and appearances of the divine names in the human realm to uncover certain

features of God.

Interesting similarities between the Dionysian corpus and the Vimalakirti sutra, however, often occur on a textual level. For example, in the Vimalakirti sutra, bodhisattvas are described as persons who “had attained the intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all things. (...) They were stamped with the insignia of signlessness” (Vimalakirti 10). It is important to note that not even bodhisattvas, who have most of the knowledge and powers of the Buddha, manage to understand the ultimate reality. Rather, the closest they can come is to tolerate the incomprehensibility of it. The incomprehensibility of the ultimate reality in the sutra can be loosely compared (allowing for the distinction between absolute and relative ineffability) to Dionysius’s identification of a God who, as a transcendent whole, makes all concepts and all descriptions inadequate. There is a sense in which God is “ultimately incomprehensible” to us, and the word ‘ultimate’ is important in that sense. There are many descriptions of him we can infer from signs, but to describe or understand God in his transcendence is an impossibility that we can only tolerate.

In the passage from the sutra, the description of the bodhisattvas as being stamped with the “insignia of signlessness” is also relevant because words (as Thurman’s note indicates) are signs. The closest the bodhisattvas can come to signlessness is to wear an insignia—something that is by definition a sign—which is meant to signify signlessness. The passage indicates that humans are bound indelibly to the realm of concepts and signs. No matter what we do, even by becoming enlightened, we will not understand the ultimate, incomprehensible reality because the reality must exist outside of our ability to perceive, think, sense, or experience it. This, too, is related in a certain way to the Dionysian corpus. Information that comes down to humans through the celestial hierarchy, Dionysius posits, must come to us through perceptible signs

which can become meaningful to us through thought. The prevalence of perceptible symbols and our reliance on them is what makes the human realm different from the divine realm in the Dionysian corpus. Both texts thus seem to relegate humans to a perceptible, linguistic world that limits what they can know of the ultimate.

For all human experience to be contained in the realm of ordinary reality, enlightenment in a Madhyamaka context must also be an expressible experience that is of the world. This idea is also expressed in the sutra. On the subject of Enlightenment, Vimalakirti tells Maitreya “No one abides in, or regresses from, enlightenment (...) Enlightenment is perfectly realized neither by the body nor by the mind (...) enlightenment is without duality, since therein are no minds and no things” (...) enlightenment cannot be realized, either physically or mentally” (Vimalakirti 35). There is a distinction to be made in this passage between perfect enlightenment and enlightenment. To be perfectly enlightened would be to see the ultimate reality outside of the realm of human perception, but the very act of seeing the ultimate reality in this way would bring the ultimate reality inside the realm of human perception, invalidating its inability to be perceived or conceptualized. In order to truly respect the idea of a non-conceptualizable ultimate reality, we cannot claim to experience or perceive it, and the realization of this in the context of the sutra seems to be what is meant by enlightenment. In the Dionysian corpus, there is a similar distinction to be made between a perfect understanding of God (i.e., an understanding of God in his transcendence) and a relative understanding of him. We can speak about God and define him in a relative way, through the symbols and divine names that appear in the human realm, or we can attempt to know God in a way that is still relative by negating the things we have reason to believe are least true of him all the way up to the things that are more true of him. The “unknowing” we arrive at in this latter way can be seen as an acknowledgement that our

concepts do not perfectly describe God in his transcendence. When we try to gain a perfect knowledge of God, we either arrive at a tolerance of incomprehensibility or at a form of relative knowledge. In both texts, then, the distinction between the ultimate in its perfection and the ultimate as it is experienced and known by us is the ground on which Robert Forman's argument for the Pure Consciousness Event becomes untenable.

The fact, for Madhyamaka Buddhists, that the ultimate reality which conditions the human reality of perception is entirely unreachable by humans has obvious ramifications for any sort of claim about Forman's Pure Consciousness Event in the context of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism because PCEs, by a Madhyamaka reasoning, are attempts to experience an ultimate reality that strictly cannot be experienced. A PCE brings into the realm of human experience another layer of contentlessness, but it is still the human experience of contentlessness. Even this cannot break outside the realm of human experience for the very reason that, if they exist, a human is alleged to have experienced it. A PCE may be valuable, insightful, or inspiring experience, but it can only be valuable, insightful, or inspiring in a human (and linguistic) context. All that humans have is the world of human perception, concepts, and language: the world in which the five aggregates and dependent origination govern our experiences. Therefore, of what is accessible to humans—of our humanly concept of everything and infinity—Tilakaratne's argument for a lack of ineffability is sufficient. There may be an ineffable reality, but it lies by definition outside of our grasp, and we should not try to grasp it because to do so would be to ultimately fail and ultimately suffer.

In the case of the Dionysian corpus, the PCE is not supported because both the method of knowing God through the affirmative theologies offered by the divine names or perceptible symbols and the method of knowing God through negative theologies (as it is understood from

Dionysius's explanation of the technique of negations in *The Celestial Hierarchy*) reduce to a case where God is known relatively. Even Moses's experience, when viewed as a direct experience of God beyond the mind, is not a Pure Consciousness Event because to justify its place in *The Mystical Theology*, it must more resemble the divine names than their opposites, such that it is an experience of something. To justify its appearance in the Dionysian corpus more widely, part of the experience or the process leading to the experience must be perceptual in nature. The constructivist might then understand Moses's experience of God as being itself a construction from these perceptible signs and symbols, rather than as a purely ineffable experience to be later constructed in its expression through words. There is never an experience of true purity or nothingness that would be unexplainable by a constructivist.

The similarities between Pseudo-Dionysius's text and the Vimalakirti sutra help to generate a coherent argument against Robert Forman's claim about the Pure Consciousness Event from the perspective of both Christian mysticism and Madhyamaka Buddhism, two of the religions on which Forman seems to rely. However, it is the differences between them that pose a threat to the more basic claim of religious perennialism that Forman is attempting to defend in his essay. Because the ultimate in Christian mysticism is only relatively ineffable and at least indirectly accessible by humans and the ultimate in Madhyamaka Buddhism is absolutely ineffable and completely inaccessible by them, it seems unlikely that an argument could be generated for these two ineffable entities being one and the same. A Pure Consciousness Event could explain the difference in ineffability by making a claim that this difference, too, is constructed by us in terms of our language and culture and previous experiences in the aftermath of a completely pure experience devoid of all concepts and perceptions, but the PCE is poorly

supported by each religion individually, so a direction that might now be taken by perennialists to account for the differences in ineffability is at best unclear.

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